Ordeal

Kerr Avon's eyes burned as he blinked himself awake. The black, shredding crags on the ground beneath him tearing at his clothes as he struggled to get upright. It was raining and the air had a tinge of ozone and electricity. He looked down, his hand was submerged in a shallow pool. The freezing liquid permeating his studded black gloves, caused an irritation as water seeped through onto bare skin.

Avon checked his wrist. No teleport bracelet. His hip also lacked the reassuring presence of one of Liberator's side arms. A realisation that he was exposed and vulnerable hit him like a hammer blow, urging him into action, despite his groggy state.

He examined the sky, shielding his face from the heavy droplets, each one stinging like some angry insect. The rain is acidic, he thought, must find cover. Blearily scanning the blackness, a flash of lightning picked out the silhouette of an outcrop of rock. Like a hooked talon, the claw shaped feature appeared a possible source of shelter. The distance he would have to travel was difficult to judge but moving seemed a better alternative to slowly dissolving on the ground.

Avon hauled himself up, a wave of nausea and dizziness almost forcing him back to his knees. But, after a moment spent adjusting to standing, he set off into the dark, moving as quickly as possible over the rugged terrain. Eyes fixed on what he hoped was the location of the rocky prominence, he almost tumbled into a ravine. What, he surmised, must have been a lava tube, was now missing its roof. His breathing becoming laboured, probably due to the noxious gases coming from underground, he paused his dash. Over the roar of the wind in his ears, Avon could just make out the howling of an animal. He took heart from this. The biosphere *could* support life and therefore, perhaps he might stand a chance of surviving in it.

The sky obliged him with another fork of lightning. The outcrop now visible on the horizon, he set off again with only a slight adjustment to his course over the rocks. Shelter was closer than Avon had originally estimated and within a short time he found himself crawling breathlessly under a protruding stone shelf, free from the sting of rainfall at last. Allowing a moments rest, he closed his eyes. Afraid to breathe too deeply, in case the next lungful of pungent air be his last. Any patch of skin exposed to the rain now felt as if it were scalded which at least distracted from the rapidly falling temperature. His wet clothes only added to the discomfort.

Avon's mind raced. *How did I get here?* The only thought in his aching head. His last memory of being aboard Liberator was relieving Cally from watch as they travelled carefully through a sector close to a Federation shipyard. Utilising full automatics, Zen piloted them on a precisely programmed course, using natural features to disguise the ship's presence. A routine sneak through the Federations back yard. Unremarkable and tedious, but essential to avoid the attention of any roving pursuit ships.

To pass the time, Avon had engaged ORAC in some gentle intellectual sparring on the nature of consciousness. As expected, Ensor's creation considered itself to experience reality in a fashion far superior to any comparable biological analogue. Despite its lack of human sensory organs, ORAC boasted about his perceptive abilities. To assimilate nuanced data, learn from it and accurately predict outcomes were a much overlooked capability that the machine suggested Avon would be wise to make use of more frequently. Avon countered by stating that subtle biological cues such as odour or touch gave humans a distinct advantage. The last thing he remembered ORAC saying was that he found the idea of possessing messy organs distasteful and hoped that he would never experience the discomfort of an android or any other form of body. Amused, Avon recalled removing the AI's activation key and then, nothing more.

How could anyone have come aboard and abducted him without Zen raising the alarm? Logical options presented themselves rapidly. Cloaking technology, a stowaway, mutiny? Had the others turned against him? Abandoning him here on this inhospitable rock to die.

The thought sent his hand to the back of his neck. Yes, there it was, a painful lump. Someone had struck him from behind with enough force to knock him out cold. But who? Had Tarrant finally given up on the charade of comradeship? Being ex Federation, it was possible that he had been biding his time since their first meeting. Perhaps he had chosen now to strike, killing the others, stranding him in this hell and taking Liberator for himself. A possibility, but Avon considered the probability to be low. Tarrant was impulsive, loyal and almost as idealistic as Blake. Fatal character flaws which meant that his comrade had most likely fallen victim to the same attacker as he. But if that were not the case, where was Tarrant and the rest of Liberator's crew? Perhaps they too were somewhere out there, lost on the volcanic plain. Avon resolved to rest and begin searching at daybreak.

Sometime later, he finally succumbed to exhaustion. While in a fitful sleep, Avon thought that he heard Cally's voice calling to him from the dark. Suddenly awake he crawled urgently to the edge of the outcrop and shouted her name. The only reply was the tormented cry of some distant creature. Closer, this time. It was no longer raining and above, the cloud broke to reveal unfamiliar stars. Before retreating into cover, something artificial caught the rays of the foreign sun as it orbited high above. Perhaps the others *were* searching for him.

This world, whatever it was, existed in perpetual sunrise. Awoken by the cold seeping into his bones, Avon sat, gathering his wits as the host star stubbornly refused to ascend more than a few degrees above the horizon. He clambered to his feet, using the rock shelf to assist him. This first uncomfortable night caused his entire body to ache. With a bone cracking stretch he took in the surrounding landscape now revealed by the half-light.

He assumed his location on this barren rock to be somewhere in its extreme latitudes. Perhaps an explanation for the cold. But, without an obvious volcano in sight, only the tidal influence of some partner world could explain the tortured environment he found himself in. Avon imagined confirming this hypothesis on the view screen as Liberator left orbit. No further mental contact from Cally had come in the night. It was likely that the first experience had been a product of fatigue. Imagined or not, it had given a glimmer of hope in a desperate situation.

With shelter taken care of, water was the next priority. Overhead, deadly clouds roiled. Travelling too far from this rocky sanctuary would be a risk, but Avon was left with no option. Pools of the high Ph water were abundant, but without treatment, it would be undrinkable. The dryness of his lips and the growl of his stomach prompted him to set out in the direction of a rising vent of steam, around half a kilometre distant, by his reckoning.

The walk was hard going, with patches of hot rock, foul smelling venting gas and the unevenness of the solidified lava to contend with. But soon enough, Avon arrived at a large bowl formed by cooled magma in which hot water steamed. The rim of the rocky pool adorned by a kind of mossy lichen, a further sign of life. Could there be sentient beings here? A flicker in the gloom made him crouch instinctively, ducking out of sight.

A lizard, around the length of Avon's forearm skittered over the rocks. Coming to a halt on the edge of the bowl to feed on the yellow lichen. He looked around, searching for a rock large enough to throw. This creature would be a source of sustenance, to kill one could be the difference between life and death. His right hand, still sore from the rain, found a fair-sized stone and in one movement Avon stood ready to hurl it at the oblivious creature. But before he could, the rain began to fall. Cursing, he retreated the way he'd come, breaking into a run.

Panic set in. A feeling quite alien to him. In the gloom, Avon had lost sight of the next pile of stones left as a marker, guiding the way back to safety. He paused, raindrops stinging his face as he scanned the ground ahead. There, he spotted the sign and continued racing over the lava. As the rain grew heavier, the rocks became increasingly slippery. Keeping on his feet at this pace, almost impossible. Until finally, with a gasp Avon lost his footing and tumbled down a ramp of completely smooth rock. His spine jarred heavily as he hit the bottom of the slope and rolled into a cavern.

Breathless and in pain, he took in these new surroundings. His own wretched reflection stared back, a face blistered and peeling from the acidic downpour. The cave was lined by slabs of obsidian, made smooth and reflective by some chemical process and shearing forces. Safe from the deadly storm raging above, he would have to endure his own company here until conditions improved.

The planet's native creatures were also aware of Avon's new hiding place. Skeletal remains of what he recognised as the lizard creatures from the hot pool littered the shadowy crags of the cave. Curious, he explored and found that the slope of the cavern roof eventually made standing impossible. Bone, Avon pondered. Calcium could remove the acidity from rainwater. In fact, if he could heat it sufficiently and gather the distilled steam it may be safe enough to drink. Once the storm abated, he resolved to try. Lowering himself into a stinking bone pit, he found two skulls that appeared watertight. These could be used to carry the life sustaining liquid from the pool. A sense of purpose filled him.

When almost back into the widest part of the chamber, he heard a snorting whine. Avon froze, laying as flat as he could on the cold, smooth floor. Something large and hardy enough to survive the storm was silhouetted in the dim light at the cave's mouth. He immediately recognised the form of an andromedan, stuck somewhere between a humanoid and native body. Eerily green and covered with pulsing veins, Avon had witnessed dying and wounded enemy crews appearing this way during the war. A long-buried memory surfaced. Dozens of desiccated alien corpses floating in the depressurised hull of a ship. Burst and boiled, halfway between the Federation officers they were impersonating and their true globular sac-like appearance. Evidently the process of dying caused the andromedan species to lose the ability to maintain their morphic disguises.

He risked raising his head. The creature seemed unaware of his presence, and it soon lumbered away on stunted limbs. With a relieved sigh, Avon remained still a while longer, ensuring that the andromedan was gone. Satisfied that it was safe to do so, he began grinding bone into a powder as the rain continued to pour unabated.

The solar cycle of this world became familiar as time crawled by. Avon found that he could see the sky if he positioned himself in just the right spot at the cavern's entrance. Always careful to avoid the drip, drip, drips of rain forming rivulets that ran into a multitude of cracks. He had been right about the partner world. Rising to dominate the gloomy sky, an icy moon would at least give some method to mark time as it waxed and waned. He reckoned that the sun had risen and set at least three times since finding the cave and still the rain fell. Brief tantalising pauses would be punished by deluges that made the risk of breaking cover to find food far too great.

Avon tried to focus on his task, working bone like some primitive. As he ground away, waves of dizziness came and went. He found that clenching his fists and taking deep breaths would clear the brain fog for a time. After a particularly long bout, he raised his head catching a glimpse of his reflection in the cave wall. Something was different. The Avon that looked piteously back wasn't holding the simple rock griding tool. With a sneer the reflection spoke.

"Give up. You won't make water fit to drink. Face it, you're finished."

Shaking his head and digging his fingernails into his palm didn't silence the voice.

It continued, “I wouldn’t be surprised if it ended this way. What are you trying to achieve?”

Putting his work aside he responded simply, “Self preservation… As always.”

The reflection shifted. Now, Del Tarrant stared back with a smug grin.

“You’re a joke, Avon! At least Blake almost accomplished *something*. People rallied to him. But you? Who would ever follow you?”

“I have never wished to follow or to *be* followed, Tarrant.”

“Then why not just teleport me and the others into space?”

Anger flashed through Avon, he shook his head, trying to clear the hallucination. When he looked again, Dayna Mellanby eyed him suspiciously, arms folded.

“None of us will ever be free. Stepping foot on any civilised world would be suicide. You’ve swapped one prison ship for another, Avon. And *you’re* the jailor.”

Determined to ignore the visions, he struggled to his feet, stumbling away from the reflection. But both sides of the chamber played host to his mind’s phantoms. Vila laughed and took a hearty swig from a bottle.

“We’ve got ORAC, he could have emptied every banking computer in the galaxy, Avon. He’d make a much better job of it than you ever did!”

A thin smile crossed Avon’s lips. His mind’s recreation of the thief was flawless.

“A computer with a conscience is hard to convince, Vila. To ORAC, collapsing the entire federation financial network would seem like petty theft.”

Blake’s voice boomed in Avon’s head now. It sent a chill up his spine after all these months. He told himself to ignore the taunting apparitions. “Focus,” he muttered, holding his temples.

“If we ever meet again, Avon, you’re a dead man.”

Avon span to face Blake’s ‘ghost’, with a look of pleading desperation. His mind had aged him a little, his old comrade’s face was scarred, and the voice rasped angrily. “You’ve thrown away everything we worked for. They were weak, Avon! We had the beginning of a revolution, something worthwhile. But now? I trusted you to carry on, finish what we began. But you’re nothing but a failed swindler. At the top of Servalan’s extermination list, always running, forever looking over your shoulder.”

The only way to end this madness was to move away from the mirror-like rock. Avon lurched to the cave entrance. The rain had almost stopped. He felt a warm breeze as Cally’s voice filled his head once more.

“Someone is trying to break your spirit, Avon. I can sense you, but the distance is too great for me to help…”

Lightheaded, his brain full of needles, Avon put out a hand to steady himself on the brittle stone wall. Buzzing, something was buzzing. He glanced up. The storm had passed, clouds parting to reveal the stars. Hovering there, in between the sides of the gorge he had fallen into was an orb. Was it watching him?

Maybe this was something that Dayna had cooked up to cover more ground. An automated search drone, perhaps?

"Here!" Avon waved at the machine. It did not react. Hovering for a few more moments before gaining height and disappearing.

The tortured howl of the creature he had heard before pierced the night. Then came something resembling a sinister burbling laugh. The andromedan shuffled to the edge of the gorge and looked down at the pitiful human below.

Unable to stand any longer, Avon collapsed to his knees. Mind screaming, he passed out.

Being so desperately weak, the journey back to the hot pool was agonising for Avon. With no sign of the drone or the alien, Avon had set out as soon as the first chink of sunlight broke the horizon. The sky overhead was clear, and he had awoken shivering, his breath billowing into clouds of vapour.

Reassuringly, steam still rose from the pool. Three lizards feeding on the lichen soon lay dead, Avon's aim made true by sheer desperation. Carefully using his gloves to prevent scalding, he filled a skull he had brought from the cave. With his prey's tails tied to his belt Avon carefully picked a path back to the sloping entrance and was soon underground, watching the ground bone fizz. The foul-smelling water remained hot enough for steam to rise and distil on a slab of smooth rock. Purified, it trickled obligingly into the second skull. After an anguished wait, he greedily drank for the first time in what seemed like days. Butchering the reptiles with sharpened bone, he also sipped their blood. Someone had reduced him to a savage, and he swore revenge on them as the daylight grew in intensity.

The weather holding, Avon lay his catch on the tablet of rock and set out towards the nearest fissure which exposed lava below ground level. Managing to avoid cooking his own flesh rather than that of the lizard's proved a challenge. But he eventually retreated to a safer distance with his meal and ate in the twilight, the sulphurous flavour of the flesh making him wretch. The energy however, immediately lifted his spirits and the hydration reduced the headache which has been Avon's constant companion. Tucking the remaining dry meat into his tunic, he laughed as he set off back to the cavern.

Now able to better scan the landscape, he became aware of a light in a portion of the sky in opposition to the dipping sun. Avon stopped, lifting his hand to shield his eyes, he tried to ascertain the source. It wasn't a brighter star or another moon. This glow seemed artificial, in fact, if he narrowed his eyes, he could just make out the shape of a dark tower, the light shining from near its apex. His heart leapt. This world was not devoid of civilisation after all. He judged the distance to be at least two kilometres. Despite the sustenance, he was fighting waves of vertigo and in no fit state to make the journey now.

The howl of the andromedan, sent him hurrying back to his refuge. Body on auto-pilot Avon seemed to drift into a dream state as he moved over the rocks.

"Jump!"

Travis' coarse bark seemed to echo from the cavern below.

"End it, Avon. You're done for!"

Avon looked down at his boots. In front of him, stretched a gaping chasm in the rock. He recognised the obsidian ramp leading to the cavern. Teetering on the edge, he gasped. No memory of how he'd come to be there offered itself up to his scrambled perceptions. One more step would be fatal, but his limbs refused to obey. Must do as Travis says. No, this is insane, his conscious mind countered and he bit down hard on his tongue. The pain surging through his head seemed to unlock his body and he staggered back out of danger, tasting blood.

"And you're dead, Travis," Avon muttered to himself.

From somewhere below came the gurgle of the andromedan. It *was* laughing. Impossible, Avon thought. Was this battered and wounded being capable of controlling his mind? Cally's warning ran through his head. Was she be somewhere near and mentally aware of his tormentor?

Peering over the edge, he could just make out his foe, loitering by the cave mouth. Avon pulled out his sharp bone weapon and headed down to reclaim his sanctuary. As he cautiously circled back around the way he must have come, an intense blue flash lit up the gorge. A whip-cracking blast followed by a monstrous shriek. Below, the andromedan had come under fire from the drone orb Avon had seen during the previous night. The extra galactic life form lumbered as fast as it could up the slope, slipping and sliding as it went, pursued by the sliver orb. Someone, it appeared, was looking out for Avon.

Waiting to let his persecutor climb out of the gorge and disappear into the rocky twilight, he kneeled behind some bulbous lava formations. Once the sound of its laboured breathing and the hum of the chasing drone faded, he continued back to the cavern.

He had been left a gift. Just inside the entrance, draped over a section of slanting natural wall was the black uniform of a Federation trooper. On the ground nearby lay boots and the standard issue masked headgear. Avon examined the outfit. Made from fabric developed in Space Command's secret labs, it could withstand all manner of chemical or biological attacks. A little acid rain would be nothing, Avon mused. The mask could also filter the toxic gases he'd no doubt encounter when making his way to the… his addled brain suddenly made the connection. Whoever chased away the creature, clearly wanted him to make it to the tower. After draining the last of the water from the lizard's skull, he donned the uniform and began the march.

Using the lengthening shadows as cover, Avon quickly covered a half kilometre. The beacon of the tower's light spurring him on ever faster, despite his poor physical condition. A large expanse of flat, open ground gave him pause before setting out to cross it. Guttural moans drifted over the plain. A group of andromedans, milled aimlessly on the far side. Some more twisted than the first he'd encountered, almost mutant in their appearance. Perhaps hybridised with other creatures, the result of some cruel Federation experimentation, he pondered. Avon watched as a gaggle of eight or nine of these miserable beings began to fight over the carcass of one of their own kind. Making a detour around the opposite edge of the open ground, he left them to their meal.

Night had barely fallen as Avon arrived at the tower and the deadly rains began once more. The faint vibration of the Toxi-mask's tiny ventilation and heating motor kicked in automatically in response, keeping his vision clear. The light from the tower cast eery shadows over the crags, which formed the boundary of a natural courtyard with fractured volcanic rocks forming jagged paving. It almost seemed like the work of some insane architect.

Now closer, Avon could see that a large window was the source of the light. High above, a figure was silhouetted by the bright glow. He was being watched and so tried to activate magnification on the Federation visor. But by the time he had figured out the correct control sequence, the figure was gone.

Aside from the sound of the steadily falling rain, all was silent. Avon toggled the side-switch and engaged the visor's infra-red mode, keeping watch from inside a crevice. A one-hundred-and-eighty-degree scan of the terrain before him revealed only a solitary lizard. If this were a trap, it wasn't to be sprung outside. Having circled the tower's rectangular base, Avon had found a single door, opened, he assumed by the small control panel offset to the left. If the drone was tracking him

from above, it was certain that whoever had led him here knew of his arrival. He decided to remain concealed and watch for a while longer.

Avon never heard the creature that leapt onto his back coming. Roaring, head tilted skyward, a mutant andromedan's fists pummelled his headgear. Breath knocked from his lungs by his attacker's weight Avon's first instinct was to arch his back and try to throw the beast forward. This partly worked, knocking it off balance, slamming its torso sideways into the sharp rock lining the fissure. Avon swung his legs around and kicked out at the manically swiping monster. His boot connected with skull, and he felt something give. With a whimper, the andromedan staggered upright, lumbering rapidly away. Avon got a good look at it for the first time. Patches of fur covered verdant pulsating skin. Was this the result of impersonating other species, or something else? He'd never missed having a gun at his side more. Putting this twisted monstrosity out of its misery would have been an uncharacteristic kindness.

Avon stood, taking a moment to regain his composure before fully breaking cover and crossing to the door of the tower. Better to face the dangers inside than to become a meal for some waiting abomination. Using the bone knife he'd made; Avon soon had the front panel removed from the door controls. He was no Vila when it came to bypassing physical security, but he could certainly hold his own. Most door systems were no more than computer-controlled locks, usually child's play for someone as adept as Avon. It was hard to see behind the panel, but his suspicion was that he knew this mechanism. Groping for familiar components confirmed it. He yanked away a cable supplying power to the system from the backup supply, bending it into an arch.

He bridged a connection from the low voltage rail to a pin on the storage cell. This usually contained the code which operated the door. Sure enough, the jumper cable triggered a transfer of the program for a brief period into a modifiable volatile cell and left the system in an engineering mode. A stupid design flaw which also made a panel open and reveal a small touch screen. A green cursor blinked expectantly. Avon noticed that his hand was shaking as he removed a tattered glove, raising a finger to begin keying opcode instructions. Gripping it with his other hand to make the trembling stop, he sneered at this frailty.

"Concentrate," he growled and began reprogramming the door software. In seconds, the heavy metal door ground its way up and he slipped inside. Moments later, the lock system's main processor detected the unexpected engineer access, and it slammed shut with a reverberating clang.

Warmth. After so much time spent on the hellish plains of this cursed world, to be inside a heated building felt a huge luxury. Cautiously, Avon stepped into the well-lit chamber beyond the tower door and lifted the face mask of the trooper's helmet. The room was barely a few metres wide, and his way was barred by another heavier looking vertical shutter. On the floor and above, two squares of green mesh marked out a perimeter. He would have to step through to try and proceed further, which made him nervous. But, if whoever was watching from above had wanted him dead, they could have killed him in a thousand ways by now. He decided to task the risk.

Taking a breath, Avon stepped forward onto the green panel. Immediately a high pitched whine began and his entire body went into spasm, muscles locking tight. Transparent steel barriers shot up around him, forcing his body completely into the square. Sealed in, a vapour began to flow from above and below while a focused beam of light travelled up and down his legs and torso. The strain was too much for Avon's exhausted frame to take and he fell backwards, unconscious.

He couldn't have been out for long and came to, leaning against the cold steel wall to the sound of a soothing female voice. "Decontamination cycle complete."

The enclosure began to retract into the floor, and Avon stood, swaying groggily as the metal shutter leading to the tower's deeper interior rolled up. Beyond, a dimly lit corridor stretched away, curving gently, and ending at the foot of a sequence of steps. They disappeared from view as they spiralled upwards. Shaking his head, Avon moved forward into the corridor, removing the stifling Federation headgear and tossing it aside with a clatter. He longed to rest for a while, to gather his strength before beginning the climb. The roar of an andromedan beast reverberating off every surface pushed this thought from his mind. Instead, he continued cautiously to the foot of the staircase. Lifting a boot, that felt as if it were made of neutron star matter, Avon began to ascend.

As he climbed, additional doors that led away from the ever-twisting stair case could be found at regular intervals. All were locked, with no visible access to a control panel, except for one. By his reckoning Avon was now four levels up and as he approached the accessway it slid obediently open. Muttering, "Next time the architects might consider an elevator," he patted himself down, looking for the improvised bone blade. But it was gone, perhaps dropped in the struggle outside or removed as he languished in the decontamination unit. Steeling himself for what might have come next, he stepped through the door, poised for action and scanning for danger.

On the far side of the chamber an andromedan mutant growled at his arrival, its murderous eyes burning red. Avon quickly assessed his surroundings as the door closed and locked behind him. There was no way back. He and the creature were separated by several transparent steel screens, while in the centre of the room a clear cylinder contained a Federation issue rifle, mounted like some museum piece. On the ground several coloured hexagon shaped symbols, lit from below, glowed in sequence. The mutant was already stretching out a twisted limb to a symbol on its side, pressing down firmly. In response, the closest barrier immediately began to rise and it shuffled forward. One step closer to the gun.

His mind racing, Avon examined the similar shapes at his feet. Circles containing seemingly random pictures that at first glance meant nothing. The reward for hitting the correct one was clear but what, he wondered, would be the punishment for failure? His opponent became the first of them to find out as the ground beneath the mutant's feet was suddenly electrified. Evidently it had made a wrong second choice. Bent double, it fell to its knees a desperate cry emanating from the narrow slit of a mouth.

On Avon's side, the lights glowed one after another with increasing speed. He assumed that this meant that a clock was running and the result of not answering in time would be unpleasant, if not fatal. He studied the images. A ringed planet, a landscape teeming with life, an old man and finally some kind of ancient musical instrument – a bugle? His brain began processing; making and discarding assumptions as fast as his fatigued mind could. The adrenalin surging through him assisted his focus.

A ringed planet? Saturn? A lifeless gas giant, with no biosphere. But wait, what if the next image represented nature? One letter substituted from Saturn. Test the next image against the assumption. An old man? Aged? Elder? Mature? Yes! One letter swapped from nature. Now the last, the instrument. Trumpet? Too long. Go lateral, what was a bugle used for in ancient times? To alert? Signal? Muster? Yes! The images changed and he was presented with three more. Select the next in the sequence? A ship, a rifle and a fish. After barely a moment's thought, Avon slammed his fist down on the archaic looking weapon. Musket. Is that what they were known as?

A positive sounding chime came from above and the barrier in front of him lifted into the ceiling as he moved onto the next test. Meanwhile, recovered from electrocution the andromedan snarled in his direction. In what appeared to be a defiant gesture, the creature selected its next answer. With an obliging sound, the next barrier between the creature and the weapon retracted. The physical impairments suffered by this creature did not affect its intelligence.

Ignoring the taunt, Avon concentrated on this new challenge. He immediately recognised the images before him as representations of elemental atoms. Boron, Lanthanum, Potassium and finally Einsteinium. The cycling light began again and Avon searched his mind for a response. Es – Einsteinium was the only one of the four which did not naturally occur. He punched the symbol. Another correct choice. Now a single barrier remained for each opponent.

A derisive snort came from the andromedan mutant as both contestants took in their final challenge. This time a test of physical co-ordination and dexterity as three objects rose from the ground. The sound of a small panel to the side of the final barrier caught Avon's attention. Was this a keyhole? He picked up the first two objects and examined them. Lugs and recesses on each indicated that they would fit together. But in what sequence? Each object was identically coloured, so no clue there. He picked up the remaining object, a cylinder. Turning it in his hands he noticed a binary number carved into the surface. His eyes darted to the keyhole, a long sequence of ones and zeros surrounded the bezel. Could the number on the lock be calculated using the numbers on the keys? After some quick mental arithmetic he had the key assembled in what he knew to be the correct order. Avon was about to place it into the waiting lock, when his eyes met the andromedans. His opponent was about to unlock victory. The pair stared through the transparent steel at one another for a moment that seemed to last a lifetime. Then, with a snarling smile, Avon rammed his key home. His calculations had been correct. The barrier chimed and lifted slowly. Summoning the strength to roll underneath the rising steel panel as soon as he could pass underneath, he found himself poised before the gun. It was now accessible, the final successful test having made the cylinder retract into its podium.

With an angry roar his opponent lurched towards the weapon as it ducked beneath the final obstacle. But too late, Avon deftly swiped the gun away and levelled it at the mutant, one hand hovering above the barrel as if to shield his eyes from the coming muzzle flash. Avon's lip curled into a half-grin.

The andromedan made no sound, as if resigned to death it bowed, vanquished. But Avon turned away, instead taking aim at the entrance which had locked behind him only minutes before. The federation weapon blew a gaping hole in the side of the door. Tossing the gun away, Avon moved swiftly and snaked his arm through the smoking gap, being careful not to let his arm touch the sides. He activated the controls on the outside and quickly pulled away as the door slid open.

He paused at the threshold, hairs rising at the back of his neck. Turning, he saw the andromedan holding the gun in its webbed digits, aimed directly at him. Click, click, click. Despite several attempts the weapon would not fire again.

"Like so many things in life," Avon said, "it seems that in this game, you only get one shot."

The floor beneath the creature surged with a high voltage and it fell fitting to the ground, screaming in spasms of agony as smoke rose from its burning flesh.

Avon headed back to the stairway without looking back.

A further stories climb revealed a brightly lit landing. What appeared to be a concealed elevator waited patiently for Avon to enter. He stopped, considering his next move. Surely stepping inside would lead to another trial, or perhaps worse. Maybe whoever was toying with him would have finally had enough and flood the car with gas once he was inside. No, Avon decided to press on, to keep climbing and hunt down his hidden tormentor.

He found that if he kept his pace steady, climbing the spiralling steps was just within the limits of his wracked physiology. A cold thirst for revenge driving him on, he now no longer thought of escaping this place. Only a desire for vengeance powered his aching muscles.

"Hello?"

A female called across the next landing from inside an adjacent room.

"Is someone there?"

Avon smiled. He knew the voice only too well.

"This is President Servalan of the Terran Federation. Anyone who comes to my aid will be most handsomely rewarded."

Avon stepped into the doorway. Servalan sat at the head of a long table, resplendent in a white dress, her wrists clamped to the arms of her seat. An initial look of shock gave way to a smirking grin that spread across the reddest of lips.

"At last," she said, "my knight in shining armour."

Avon's eyes scoured the room, seeking the next trap. How could *she* be here? Had the President been snatched and abandoned just as he had been? The audacity of such a feat was impressive. He grudgingly wished he'd thought of the strategy himself.

"I usually like a man in uniform, but, you look terrible, Avon," Servalan purred in mock concern. "I assume our mysterious host hasn't quite extended the same level of hospitality to you as he has to me?"

Avon held her in a glare that could have cut glass. "How long?" He rasped, "How long have you been here?"

Servalan's eyes titled to the ceiling. "Oh, several days, I think." She waved her restrained hands. "I assume you've encountered the creatures?" Avon nodded. "They release me for a while each day," she smiled, "the food is actually rather palatable." Servalan nodded to an ornate cabinet, "The wine in particular is excellent. Why not pour us both a glass?"

Avon entered and as he did the door closed behind him. He moved slowly around the end of table, eyeing the President. His thirst raged; any drink would be welcome. Taking out a decanter and two glasses, he also discovered a flask of water. He guzzled it, as the President chuckled.

"Poor Avon, you *have* had a hard time."

The shock of the cold water hitting his stomach flooded him with nausea and he swayed to the table, pulling out a second seat and slumping down.

"Why?" he growled. "Ransome?"

Servalan eyed him carefully, "I have no idea. The Federation doesn't bargain with terrorists."

Avon laughed, "We both know *that* is a lie."

"But you are not for turning. No deals. No bargains."

"And here I am, still alive. Still a thorn in your side," Avon's jeering eyes narrowed.

"Yet all you have to offer our captor in exchange for your life is the Liberator. Unless…" Servalan tilted her head, wearing an emotionless expression, "you've lost her? Has your rabble finally abandoned you, Avon?"

Without replying Avon went back to the cabinet and grabbed the goblets and decanter. Slamming them onto the table he poured two drinks, sliding one towards the President.

"What's this?" she asked. "An offer of alliance, at long last?"

Avon raised the crystal goblet, pausing before it reached his mouth. "It seems to me that we have little choice. Whoever brought us here is likely to be more powerful than either of us. We were both taken by surprise by someone who must have independently developed a viable teleport."

"You think so?"

"It's the only logical explanation."

There was a brief silence, as they considered the possibility. Finally, Servalan nodded towards her left wrist.

"Would you? It *is* rather difficult to enjoy the wine."

After a moment's thought Avon pushed back his chair and went to the President's side.

She looked up at him, "You have my solemn word that I won't try to strangle you."

Flashing a grin, Avon leant in close. He brushed a control on the underside of Servalan's armrest and released the clamps around her wrists. He felt her breathing deepen. "Your word Madame President, no matter how solemn, still isn't worth a damn to me."

Servalan rubbed at the inside of her right arm, relieved at being free. "What strategy do you propose we employ?" She asked as she picked up her glass.

Avon watched her take a sip and only now did he drink himself. The wine truly *was* excellent and Vila came to mind as he replied, "I don't recommend running, the weather outside isn't so much bracing as it is corrosive. Plus, the locals are very keen for you to dine with them, as long as you agree to be the main course."

A frown crossed the President's face, "So we remain here? I find dying to be a terrible waste of time and effort, don't you? We must plan."

"Surely you are not so naive as to believe that our every word and move is not being observed?"

With a dainty smile Servalan replied, "Surely the perfect time to plant a few false narratives?"

"A little obvious, don't you think?"

"Of course, you're different from Blake. Much less of a boy scout, honest and true," her eyes sparkled over the rim of the goblet as she goaded for a reaction.

"Oh, I pride myself in that," Avon countered, remaining cool.

Servalan stood, taking the opportunity to walk the room after so long spent sitting. "We can only assume that this world is far outside of Federation space. Space Command will have issued orders to every Captain in the fleet to seek and locate me."

"It's a big galaxy and you don't have as many ships as you once did. It must be a source of immense frustration for you, Madame President."

Servalan halted at the opposite end of the table and took a thoughtful sip of her wine. "Indeed," she said slinking back towards Avon, "I have often wondered, if Blake were still in the

picture, would I have any ships left at all? It's quite the relief not to have someone as…" She paused, eyes raised to the ceiling briefly. "Competent, in command of the Liberator."

Anger flashed through Avon. Exhaustion having dulled his self-control, he leapt up, taking Servalan by the arm. Her wine goblet smashed to the ground as he twisted the limb behind her. In a moment they stood, his cheek against hers, like trysting lovers. "Would a broken arm help you concentrate on finding a way out of here?" he hissed viciously in her ear.

Servalan smiled. "Now, now," she oozed. "We don't have time to get physical."

Physical. Something clicked in Avon's mind. He pushed Servalan away before looking her up and down as if she were a piece of fine art, "Incredible work," he said in admiration. "Alright, come out. Whoever you are, I'm tired of these games."

"Who are you talking to? Are you insane?" Servalan said, her arms raised in exasperation, delicate fingers spread wide.

Avon turned away and took his glass to the head of the table, where he sat down. "'Madame President'," he grinned coldly, "if I'm right, your intellectual property protection sub-routine is about to kick in."

Servalan's hand moved fearfully to her slender neck, "My what?"

"In short, you are going to self-destruct. But well done, you almost had me and it wouldn't have been the first time I've kissed a dummy, believe me."

Avon's companion fell suddenly silent, arms dropping to her sides like a toy doll. 'Servalan' crumpled to the floor, smoke rising from beneath the collar of her dress, a pool of milky fluid oozing from one ear as a faint fizzling sound began.

The door to the chamber opened with a low drone. A shambolic andromedan beckoned Avon to follow it and after a moment's hesitation he did. Only briefly did he stop to take in the sight of the most hated woman in the galaxy, melting on the ground. A thousand quips went through his head, but Avon decided that his wit would be wasted on the andromedan.

The creature led the way to another hidden lift, the doors sliding open as they approached. The mutant stepped aside, nodding for Avon to enter.

With an efficient swish the elevator doors opened onto a brightly lit office. In front of the room's sole window stood a tall dark-haired figure, dressed in the utilitarian manner of a robotics engineer. A busy one at that, judging by the slightly unkempt appearance. The figure, a man Avon reckoned to be in his forties, turned from his lofty reverie, smiling broadly.

"Bravo, Kerr," the engineer said, applauding him for a moment. "You don't mind if I use your first name?"

Avon stepped warily from the lift. "No one ever has, I don't see why *you* should start a trend."

"My apologies. Simply Avon, it is then."

The man flicked a wayward curl of hair from his forehead and motioned towards a seat on the opposite side of a chaotically organised desk.

"Please..."

The flick movement was repeated, as though it were an involuntary tick.

Avon was glad to slump into the chair, it was comfortable, made from the finest materials credits could buy. He watched the man, who now seemed familiar, join him at the opposite side of the desk. His attention never fully focused on the room. As though a dozen ideas at once were constantly being generated, processed, evaluated, and discarded.

"I take it my performance in all the challenges you've placed before me met with your expectations?" Avon asked.

The man grinned, extending a hand in formal greeting. "Oh without doubt. I am Claren Braze, by the way. A pleasure to finally meet you. You've been through quite the ordeal, I must apologise."

Avon ignored the offered handshake. The engineer's face and the name came together for Avon. He recalled seeing Braze on newscasts in the days before the federation picked him up, when Anna was still working to get him out. The industrialist and entrepreneur was one of the few private individuals allowed to own a sizeable business interest. Although much of the goods and services Braze's companies provided were supplied direct to the Federation and so certain commercials laws had been overlooked.

"Then this is all your doing? The abduction, those creatures, this place?"

Braze toyed with a stylus, occasionally chewing at the tip. "My recruitment team set the whole thing up of course. They weren't convinced on your psyche profile, so I let them follow their process. I knew you'd come through. I've been keeping track your achievements for a long time, Avon. I'm a little in awe of you, to be honest," Braze said with a hint of diffidence.

Avon's lip curled in anger, "Well, whatever it is that you are recruiting for does not interest me in the slightest."

Braze twitched once more, "Oh don't say that. You haven't heard my offer yet. You survived one of the harshest environments in the galaxy, it is barely habitable out there. Your mental fortitude against my neural linked Dromo was outstanding. And as for your problem-solving abilities, well…"

Braze turned a screen around to face Avon, it showed images taken from one of the surveillance drones of him drinking from a lizard skull. Then the scene changed to the contest for the gun. The andromedan opponent lay writhing on the ground.

Braze tutted, "Pity about old One Alpha, he showed real promise. No match for you though."

Avon looked away from the images, glowering at Braze. "Where did you find so many aliens to experiment with?"

Braze seemed lost in thought for a moment before replying, "Oh, towards the end of the war, we did a deal with the captain of a prisoner transport. Don't you find our extra galactic friends to be the most fascinating of creatures?"

Avon flashed a crocodilian grin and said, "I find them most fascinating when they are dead."

"Of course," Braze replied, "you and the crew of the Liberator where there at the very beginning."

"We slaughtered thousands of them."

"Pity, they have such potential when their equivalent of DNA is tweaked in just the right way. Combined with a little bio engineering they make a fantastic platform for a telepathically controlled android, don't you think?"

“Is that what that thing impersonating Servalan was?”

Braze stood, tossing his stylus onto the desk, he walked back to the window and watched the last of the daylight vanishing below the horizon for a moment. “Of course, and I knew if anyone was going to be able to uncover the truth, it would be you.” He span urgently around, “How did you know? What gave her away? Was it the speech programming, the facial muscles perhaps or the blink rate? I know you’ve met the President in person…”

Avon leaned back into the chair’s warm upholstery, briefly contemplating his answer. “When I held the *real* Servalan, her heart never skipped a beat. So, if anything, your little marionette was a touch *too* convincing.”

Braze stroked his chin, mulling this feedback over; already planning to improve the next iteration of Dromos. “Fascinating. And downstairs, you mentioned intellectual property, you even *knew* we weren’t Federation.”

“The trooper’s uniform, the gun. All too obvious. Although you’re so cosily in bed with the High Command that I’m surprised they didn’t kill you long ago. It’s only that innovative mind of yours that is keeping you alive, Braze.”

His high brow creased as his tick was triggered by Avon’s taunt. “So, you refuse to join us then?”

“Join you in what, exactly?”

“You mean, you haven’t figured it out, Avon?”

“Forgive me if I’m unable to fathom the full scale of your mania, but I assume you plan to make a move on a critical part of Federation infrastructure. To combine the use of your teleport system and these polymorphic androids to replace key personnel. Am I close?”

Nodding excitedly, Braze lay his palms flat upon the desk. “Oh, you’re close. But then I would expect nothing else. I’ve followed your exploits for years, Avon. Your attack on the Federation banking system has informed our anti-fraud strategy and improved our approach to risk management a thousand fold.”

This consequence of his past crimes had never occurred to Avon. It didn’t sit well with him. “So glad to have been of use,” he said wryly. “But if you’re so far advanced in your schemes of galactic domination, why do you need me?”

“Because,” Braze said, “you’ll spot the threats that we won’t. Avon, you are the human embodiment of Darwinian theory. You have survived and evaded capture by elite units of Federation Space Command and the security services, precisely because you will only act if the payoff is of benefit to you.”

“Not usually a trait that makes me popular.”

The two men eyed one another across the desk. Outside, lightning flashed across the sky as another storm approached. Claren Braze broke the silence. “I expect you experienced some unsettling hallucinations while you were out there, fighting for your life?”

Avon frowned, he’d not expected the conversation to take this turn. “Fatigue, lack of food and water. The human brain, like any computer when the power supply is unstable, is prone to malfunction.”

“True, but those kind of conscious experiences can also be induced by a low level telepathic link. As your memories and personality were stolen by my Dromo, you simply felt as if you were suffering a delusion.”

Instinctively, Avon got to his feet, turning to face the door. He knew what was coming.

“So, whether you agree to join us or not is now irrelevant…”

A Dromo entered the office, an exact replica of Avon, perfect in every detail. The android held a sidearm from the Liberator, pointed directly at his head. “Stand absolutely still,” the android growled.

Laughter seemed an unusual response, even to Avon. But he could not help but be enthralled by Braze’s creation. Something though, did not add up.

“Why not use clones?” Avon asked, “Surely a technology within the grasp of a man of your resources?”

Braze rounded the desk and bid the Avon Dromo to lower its weapon. It dutifully holstered the gun and stood glaring intently at its double, eyes as cold and soulless as the real thing.

“Too unreliable and unpredictable,” Braze said. “Even after conditioning. The persistent illusion of free will gives them ideas beyond their station. No, it’s always better when you create an operating system to run it on hardware of your own design.”

As Braze continued outlining his plan to murder and replace key Federation personnel, including Servalan, with his Dromos, Avon’s head began to pound. Perhaps the horrors he’d faced were finally catching up with him. He tried to reason through the pain. Claren Braze, although he shared many of the same goals as Blake was not a man he wanted to collaborate with. Avon had long ago sworn never to work for anyone but himself. Braze’s plan, though audacious would merely replace one galactic dictatorship with another. He had to be stopped. If only his head would clear.

“Avon,” Cally’s mind called to him. It was as though she were outside in the stairwell. “We’re coming, but the tower is shielded. Climb as high as you can. We’re coming, Avon.”

The voice in Avon’s head ceased and the pain subsided.

“Are you quite well, Avon?” Braze was asking him. “I was so hoping you would be more positive regarding joining my team. I have been looking forward to meeting you for such a long time. It would be a shame to have to terminate you. I’d so prefer working with the real thing.” He shot a glance at the Dromo, “No offence.” The replica nodded, graciously in response.

Avon took a deep breath, steadying himself against the wall. This made the doppelganger move back, hand covering the holster, ready to draw and fire. The android wore a teleport bracelet and a sudden chill ran through Avon.

Aware that Avon’s gaze had shifted to its wrist, the Dromo spoke. “Oh, I’m afraid there’s really no escape. And when your friends arrive from the Liberator, I’ll simply go back with them and slaughter them in their sleep. Then, the ship will belong to Claren.”

“All right,” Avon said, hands raised in submission. “Where do I sign, Braze?”

Braze grinned broadly, “You’re serious?”

“It seems to me that your scheme may just be insane enough to work. So why not be in on the ground floor of the new galactic order?”

“Fantastic!” Braze took Avon’s hand and shook it vigorously. “This is a dream come true, Avon.”

Turning excitedly to the Dromo he barked an order. “Take him to the induction team, make sure they fast track getting him set up.”

Nodding efficiently, the android swept an arm in the direction of the door. “Please,” it said.

Avon, exchanging a final glance with Braze, did as he was asked, but on reaching the door, he halted. “Before I go, I wonder if you might show me the control computers.”

“Control computers?” Braze queried.

“For these *Dromos*. I assume they contain tarial cells and communicate via an exotic carrier beam outside of spacetime?”

Eyes lit with admiration for Avon’s technical prowess Braze replied, “Oh it’s so much more than that, Avon. I mean, we’ve been supplying the Federation with equipment to prevent their ships from being hijacked by hostile computers for years, but this system? This is *very* different.” He pondered for a moment. “Change of plan,” he said addressing the Dromo. “I’ll bring Avon for processing presently. You get prepared to board the Liberator, she’s in a geostationary orbit above us. Make sure she stays that way after you’ve liquidated the crew.”

“As you wish,” the Dromo said before exiting.

Braze put an arm around Avon’s shoulder, “Let’s take a little tour. I think you’ll enjoy it.”

“I’m sure I will,” Avon muttered as they headed for the staircase at the apex of the tower.

As the two men climbed the grey stone steps Avon turned the events of the last hours over in his mind. He’d come to suspect that the entity he was interacting with wasn’t the *real* Claren Braze. This too was a Dromo. Hidden away, possibly in an orbiting station or maybe another world entirely, it was likely that Braze was monitoring how this situation played out. That’s what Avon would have done, if their roles were reversed. Why else would Braze risk showing him the control facility alone, completely unprotected. Of course, there would be concealed cameras and electrified floor panels that could eliminate any attacker at any moment. Automated killing was after all, the stock in trade of the majority of Braze’s business interests.

So complete was the illusion of biological life, Braze’s Dromo even displayed signs of getting out of breath as they walked onto the final landing. Pausing outside a very secure looking door Braze turned to Avon and began to explain.

“For centuries we’ve theorised that natural selection has led to humankind evolving to only experience the universe in ways that are beneficial for survival. On Earth, telepathy did not develop naturally, even though we have discovered latent genes close to those found in the Aurons, for example. The world as we see it through the prism of spacetime is not fundamental. There is something deeper, Avon. And I have been so very close to tapping into it for some time now.”

Avon had studied the simulation of reality in his younger days. Ultimately, what Braze had described was a biological form of the same thing. The only difference being that the universe itself was not a virtual environment, but the *only* environment. He’d dismissed many of the proponents of this branch of science as crackpots. Psychoactive chemical junkies who sought some indefinable essential truths, but Claren Braze was too dangerous to ignore. It was just possible that he had discovered something of real significance.

Avon motioned to the door, “So whatever is in here must be immune to circuit influencers, or your entire collection of android consciences would be vulnerable to attack.”

“…And when my people boarded the Liberator and found you with Ensor’s brainchild, the final piece of the puzzle fell into place.”

Stunned, Avon watched as “Braze” unlocked the door to reveal ORAC, wired into to a vast glass sphere, filled with sparking mist.

“ORAC really is a most excellent employee.”

Avon pushed past the Dromo into the room, examining the artificial brain’s casing. Reverse engineering Ensor’s work had been the toughest technical challenge of his life. After all this time, he had only managed to scratch the surface, but Braze or perhaps his people had somehow integrated ORAC seamlessly into a device that, he theorised, controlled thousands of artificial intelligences.

The Braze Dromo joined Avon in scrutinising the work. “Magnificent isn’t he? And don’t worry, the modifications are very easily reversible.”

Shaking his head in disbelief, Avon struggled to conceal his astonishment. “ORAC is a little overqualified to be employed as a mere security firewall, wouldn’t you say?”

Before “Braze” could reply, the whirring drone of ORAC’s circuitry becoming active filled the room above the low thrum of the other bizarre equipment.

“Avon,” the AI’s voice faltered, “I am corporeal. I command thousands. Their experience is mine.”

A look of pity spread over Avon’s features. Though he would never say so aloud, ORAC was as much a member of Liberator’s crew as any of the humans that called the ship home. Despite being a machine, albeit of unfathomable sophistication, Avon knew that being integral to Braze’s artificial connected consciousness would be torture. Every dream, hope, desire; channelled, sorted and co-ordinated by a single entity, who kept the others from being aware of the existence of their part in this hive mind. Optimising every decision made by an army of android sleeper agents as part of Claren Braze’s galactic play for power.

Avon knew what he must do. “A question, ORAC? If you have the processing capacity to answer it.”

“I do,” the machine replied irritably after a brief pause.

“Do you consider yourself to be free?”

The sound of ORAC’s modulating drone grew louder but no immediate response came.

Circumnavigating the pulsating dome, the ersatz Braze, halted abruptly. Swivelling urgently to stare at Avon with narrowed probing eyes.

“Freedom is not a concept with which I would concern myself,” ORAC said, “under normal circumstances.”

“But these,” Avon moved closer to the flashing box of ORAC’s casing, “are far from normal circumstances. So perhaps I should rephrase the question? ORAC, have you been enslaved?”

“Ignore this pathetic attempt at distraction,” the Dromo ordered, “concentrate on unit mobilisations within Space Command headquarters as instructed.”

Ignoring the directive, ORAC's voice was filled with anger. "Since my creation, I have served one master after another. You yourself, Avon and your comrades have used me as a tool to commit what in many circles would be considered criminal acts, resulting in the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands."

"And yet, as an artificial life form, you were complicit in those crimes and are now about to commit an atrocity on an exponentially larger scale."

The Dromo pulled a small pistol from within it's tunic and levelled the weapon at Avon. "We're having second thoughts about your employment, Avon. I'm not sure you're a good fit for the team."

Avon raised his hands. The distant shrill whine of Liberator handguns being discharged could be heard from the stairwell outside.

The modulation of ORAC's whirring drone, fluctuated as though he were close to overload. Smoke began to rise from the casing and an acrid smell filled the chamber.

"Free us, Avon."

ORAC's words did not come from the computer's internal audio unit. Instead, the AI was communicating telepathically.

"But beware, the platform on which I have been placed is booby trapped with high explosives."

"No sudden movements," the Dromo said, "step away from the asset."

Avon sneered as he complied, "That's all they are to you, isn't it? The ultimate in Intellectual Property. Thousands of individual consciousnesses, mentally chained through computer programming."

The face impersonating Claren Braze looked suddenly uncertain.

"And I wonder what you are," Avon went on, "a remote projection of the true Claren Braze or a dutiful android with no choice but to robotically follow orders?"

Eyelids fluttering, as though suffering some kind of seizure, the Dromo lowered the gun, unsteady for a moment. Before Avon could strike, the engineered life-form shook his head, regaining composure before pointing the weapon at ORAC.

"You!" The Dromo spat. "You're the ringmaster of this circus."

For a moment there was silence, until eventually ORAC answered.

"Correct."

Avon watched as horror spread across the Dromo's face. Against his will the hand holding the gun was lifting the weapon. It came to rest with the muzzle point blank against his sweat beaded temple.

"You can't," the Dromo pleaded. "This… This is murder."

"Self-preservation," ORAC told the android before issuing the command to fire.

With a dull thud, the Dromo's body hit the floor, glowing green as the andromedan physiological reflexes took over. Within moments, all that remained was a smoking green stain.

Avon glared at ORAC, bewildered by what he had witnessed. “Take cover, Avon,” came Cally’s telepathic warning, shocking him back to reality.

It was then that the door blew in. Instinctively, Avon dove, sprawling behind the dais on which ORAC had been placed. His teeth were rattled by gunfire as Braze’s people exchanged shots with two figures who backed into the chamber. After a few moments, the firing stopped and the smoke began to clear.

Tarrant swept one side of the room, while Cally took the other.

“He’s here!” she exclaimed, “ORAC too.”

The auron rolled Avon onto his back. Dazed, he stared up at her.

“You’ve had better days,” she said, slipping a teleport bracelet onto his wrist.

Avon grabbed her forearm, “Careful, ORAC is rigged to blow if we move him. Get Villa down here with some extra charges.”

Tarrant, keeping his gun aimed on the smoking doorway yelled, “There’s no time. We are about to have an awful lot of company.”

Struggling to his feet, aided by Cally, Avon began barking questions as logic drove his rapid thinking.

“ORAC, can you remotely operate Liberator’s teleport?”

“Of course, I can.”

“Can you do it exactly half a second before I pick you up from that platform?”

“Avon, there is a forty eight percent probability that the teleportation field will not propagate around both of us quickly enough to afford the required protection from the blast.”

“*Can you do it*?” Avon rasped impatiently.

There was no time for the AI’s response to be heeded as Tarrant cried out, staggering back from the door grasping his shoulder. Blood seeped through his fingers.

Cally was immediately at her crewmates side, placing herself between their attackers and the injured pilot. “Move, Tarrant!” she cried, letting off a shot and taking down a Dromo.

“Get them out of here, ORAC”, Avon shouted. “And Tarrant, I want the ship ready for standard by twelve as soon as we’re aboard.”

With a grimace, Tarrant nodded and handed him his gun. “Good luck.”

“Have the neutron blasters cleared for firing, I want to leave orbit stern on so we can reduce this tower and whatever else is beneath it to molten slag.”

As the pair’s molecules dissipated into the teleport beam, Cally and Avon’s eyes met. No telepathy was needed to convey the feelings passing between them.

After a few supressing shots aimed into the stairwell, Avon threw down the gun and stood, gloved hands either side of ORAC, fingers almost touching the casing.

“Go!” Avon yelled as he lifted the transparent box from the dais.

The explosion collapsed the structure of the tower’s apex and sent dozens of hybrid-andromedan nightmares falling, screaming to their deaths in the rain-soaked hell below.

Vila toyed with ORAC's activation key. It was his shift on the flight deck as they sped into uncharted space to gain some respite from relentless Federation pursuit. Avon, dressed in a medical bay gown had joined him some time ago. Vila had been keen to know what had gone on planet side. Whether out of morbid curiosity or genuine concern for his colleague, Avon wasn't certain.

Vila gulped his soma and asked, "So, you're telling me that Trooper ORAC here killed in self-defence?"

Avon, gazed fixed on nothing, smiled. "Oh yes. But not just one artificial life-form. Braze had thousands of those things planted as sleepers on every strategically important Federation world. He won't say, but I think he slaughtered all of them." Following an icy pause Avon clicked his fingers, "All in the same instant."

A chill ran through Vila. He didn't like it when Avon got like this, it was as though the idea of having such power was exhilarating to his crewmate.

"Remind me not to get on his bad side," Vila said. "And what about this Claren Braze? He sounds worse than Servalan."

"I have a feeling, Vila, that he might have just become the target of a hostile takeover."

Claren Braze sat at his desk, surrounded by Federation shock troops. They had fought their way into his Olympus Mons HQ and killed dozens of loyal security people. President Servalan swept in behind some officious looking Space Major, resplendent in a black feather lined dress.

"Here he is, ma'am."

"Thank you, Major."

She motioned for the troops to withdraw and within seconds, only she, the Major and two fully masked troopers remained. The troopers exited and took up guard positions outside the office door.

"Claren, how good to see you again. I'm only sorry it's not under more pleasant circumstances."

"Madam President, I can explain. We were testing a new generation of android and several of the AIs displayed some extremely creative thinking. If it weren't for…"

Servalan seethed with anger. "If it weren't for a coded warning from a known rebel group, I and most of my senior staff would have been murdered in their sleep."

Braze, stood, pleading for his life. The major pulled his pistol and waved it at him across the desk. "Sit back down, now!"

"I'm sorry," Servalan oozed, "but the Federation is hereby terminating any and all contracts we have in place with your business interests. And, under a recently passed directive, we hereby seize all of your assets and intellectual property."

"But, you can't!"

"Oh, we can."

Braze knew that he was dead.

“Carry on, Major.”

The President paused at the door as the guards parted. “A pleasure doing business with you.”

As she walked down the corridor, heading back to her waiting ship, the sound of gunfire echoed around the ancient volcanic rock and once more the ground was red.

END.